



Just the FAQs: An Alternative to Teaching the Research Paper

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James Strickland

Just the FAQs: An Alternative to Teaching the Research Paper

Changing the form of the traditional research paper could result in a greater emphasis on inquiry. James Strickland advocates use of an alternative form of presentation that capitalizes on available technology and requires students to develop thinking, reading, writing, and presentation skills.

As I walked around the computer lab, Brian, one of my students, called me over to see what he had done. He had placed a photo of a player scoring a goal into his draft about rugby, making the text wrap around the photo the way it does in magazine articles. I admired the technique, and he asked if he had to credit the photo in a "footnote or something." Liz, sitting next to him, asked if he'd show her how to put a photo into her paper about Siberian tigers. While I was trying to find the correct format for citing photographs, I asked Brian what his thesis about rugby was going to be. "You remember," I said. "What is your point? What is your paper going to prove?"

"Rugby is the greatest sport ever," he answered.

"I'm going to prove Siberian tigers are really cool," Liz chimed in.

While I tried to refresh their memories about the proper subject for a research paper and the importance of having a thesis, they both objected, saying, "But look at all the research we've done." Maybe I had gotten off track by focusing on authentic research, letting students' interests and questions drive the research. We were doing so well, using search engines to find Web sites and browse material, getting full-text documents online from periodicals, searching library holdings with sophisticated text-recognition tools, finding answers to what they wanted to learn. And, I had to admit, Brian and Liz had discovered some interesting information that I certainly never knew about rugby and tigers. But it didn't fit my notion of the traditional research paper, and I had to wonder what I was

trying to teach them in the first place. Every year it seems to get harder to teach this type of writing.

Technology Changes Research

One of the problems with a traditional research paper has been the wedding, for better or worse, of inquiry-based research with thesis-driven persuasive writing. Instead of requiring students to write a paper in fifteen weeks that proves a thesis, we might better focus on teaching inquiry that is organic, developing and changing as the researcher wonders and learns. Rather than trying to teach research to support a thesis, perhaps the time has come for a divorce, for teaching rhetorical argument as a separate, shorter assignment with fewer cognitive demands. This might encourage students to stay open to possibilities that emerge as links to future inquiry. Our goals should be to "return student research to inquiry that ends with better questions" and teach "research as a passionate attempt to understand those parts of the world that move us not only to ask questions, but often to act," even when we lack answers (Shadle and Davis 105, 106).

This organic inquiry type of research can be helped tremendously by technology, with its search engines, metasearches, spiders and gophers, and email interviews, but the danger is that as the computer changes the way we conduct research, it can

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dazzle, distract, and overwhelm student researchers with its graphics, its color, and its seemingly endless stream of links. No wonder it makes students like Brian and Liz forget all about thesis statements. In fact, the technology challenges students to validate material in ways that standard library research never seemed to require, such as checking the Web site's pedigree, claims, and authority. For example, a recent conference presenter shared a Web site that an embarrassing number of students believed credible: "Clones-R-Us" from Dream Technologies International (Permenter).

Even though teachers see the value of the traditional research paper, research writing must reflect the culture. And if we admit that technology has changed the culture of research, then it makes sense to think that technology will also change the look of our research presentations, specifically the research paper itself. I have experimented with a variety of alternate formats for students to present their research findings, including a research poem, a letter to a concerned recipient discussing the research and the imagined resulting correspondence, a play scene in which actors discuss the research subject, a photo essay, or a collage. However, none of these alternatives take advantage of the technology.

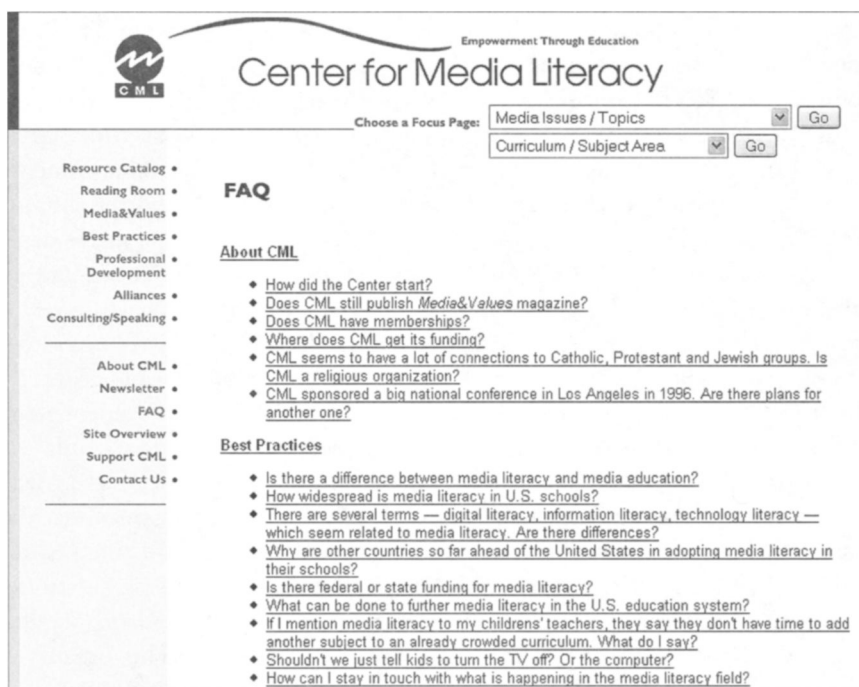
Asking the Right Questions

For my money, the new form of research presentation, the new research paper, if you will, will be the FAQs (pronounced "facts"), or Frequently Asked Questions. This type of writing originated sometime at the end of the last century, growing in popularity until the format is found on almost every Web site today, especially on commercial sites. Go to any Web site and look for the FAQ or FAQs link that provides background about the subject of the Web site.

Once you click on the FAQs button, you'll find the distinguishing feature of this type of document is its table-of-contents-like listing at the top, in colored font, linking the listed entries to the page's content, allowing you to jump from the FAQs question of interest to the answer. The linking technology, like that employed in the FAQs writing genre, was developed because readers get lost in lengthy computer documents, and these links help readers navigate to specific places in the document and then return with a "back to the top" link. Figure 1 shows an example taken from the Center for Media Literacy Web site. The format is structured to take advantage of the technology.

One of the insights Lee Odell and Dixie Goswami gained from studying writing outside of academic settings was that documents can be made more accessible to readers by looking at the material in the document from the reader's point of view, considering how potential readers might use a document to find answers to their questions. Other researchers also found that the use of headings in documents

FIGURE 1. FAQs Page from the Center for Media Literacy Web Site



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increases accessibility and that formatting those headings as questions improves readers' ability to navigate text (Redish, Battison, and Gold 138–39). The FAQs format employs both elements—headings and questions.

To understand why I believe this type of research document has the potential to replace the traditional research paper, let me try to explain why we teachers in high school and college English courses teach research papers in the first place. As everyone knows, the ultimate task in graduate studies is the dissertation, a heart-stopping volume that answers a research question examining a minute, perhaps esoteric, point. To prepare for this daunting task, master's-level students do a thesis, which is seen by many as a mini-dissertation. Some colleges prepare their undergraduate majors for graduate work by requiring a senior thesis, but almost every college feels obliged to prepare their students with an entry-level course in research writing, one in which students investigate a topic and defend a thesis in a ten-to-twenty-page paper that includes a Works Cited page following MLA or APA style. This provides a place to teach library use and information literacy. To prepare students for college work, high school teachers feel obliged to teach the research paper, complete with notecard strategies and lessons on plagiarism. The dominoes continue to fall until pressure is exerted on middle schools and even elementary schools to prepare their charges for the rigors of the next level. But, outside of this farm-league system of school preparation, no one writes research papers. Granted, many people in a variety of occupations with a variety of interests engage in research, and some people even prepare reports based on some level of research, but the resemblance of these reports to the college research paper is one seen only by teachers looking for justification for the enormous energy exerted in the mission.

Almost no one is happy with the resulting "term" papers, so-called because the projects usually take an entire term to complete. Students worry whether they have enough sources; teachers worry whether the paper has been plagiarized. The thesis that the paper argues is usually one that neither student nor teacher is invested in, and the result is, whether anyone admits it or not, often simply an exercise. The real reason for research—inquiry—can become lost in the process of trying to teach the method and the form.

The difference between this research genre and the FAQs is obvious on almost any Web site: Click the FAQs button to discover a plethora of information, arranged in some logical order but navigable by jumping to pertinent information. Admittedly, the FAQs designation is a misnomer; the document might better be named Arbitrarily Answered Factual Matter. At commercial sites, someone in customer relations may be keeping track of what customers want to know, but I suspect that no one asked, much less asked frequently, any of these questions. They are simply section headings phrased, much the way *Jeopardy* answers are, in the form of a question. The questions are a convention of the genre—a way to organize information. And, as such, creation of FAQs is a useful skill to teach. Brian would be well-advised to take the information he has learned about rugby and organize it in a way that someone curious about the sport would find satisfying and informative. Writing FAQs would be a project more worthwhile for him than concocting some half-hearted thesis statement.

So, the FAQs format has real-world relevance and can be created after someone has researched a topic of interest, using library skills and information literacy. The technique of creating the FAQs headings and links is relatively easy to master (the actual directions are given in fig. 2 and illustrated by fig. 3); the skill in creating FAQs comes in creating interesting questions with informative answers that a reader might be concerned enough to want to learn. Thus, the FAQs technique teaches what Odell and Goswami advocate—examining the material from the reader's perspective and creating headings to organize the information.

Once the document is complete, the Table of Contents listing functions as an outline, which is another of those often-taught assignments that previously seemed irrelevant to students. Elsewhere, I have argued that outlining is a strategy better employed in revision than as a model to generate text (Strickland). In this format, creating the FAQs Table

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FIGURE 2. Directions for Linking a FAQs Document

1. Once a section of the document has been written, return to the passage and create a heading that can function as a section heading. For example, a passage might begin with the explanation, "When referring to research sources, identify them by their claim to expertise and with their full name (first and last names) the first time you refer to them. Simply use the last name after that." The heading that might introduce this answer could be phrased as, "How do I refer to people I use as research sources, especially those I interview?"
2. With a word-processing program such as Microsoft Word, mark the heading with a bookmark by clicking on the Insert choice on the main toolbar and selecting Bookmark from the menu. This will prompt you to create a name for the bookmark, which can be as brief as one word so long as it is memorable. For example, the bookmark for the above example could be "refer."
3. Click the Add button to finish the process.
4. At this point, copy and paste the recently created heading—"How do I refer to people I use as research sources, especially those I interview?"—to the top of the document, the first page.
5. Once a copy of the FAQ is at the top, highlight it again by dragging the mouse and link it to the bookmark by clicking on the Insert choice on the main toolbar and selecting the Hyperlink tool from the menu (or use Ctrl + K). The hyperlink icon looks like a globe with a paperclip.
6. This will prompt you to click on the bookmark just created in the "Named location in the file" section, as in the "refer" example.
7. Click the OK button to finish the process. An example of completed FAQs is shown in Figure 3. The process can be repeated for the entire document as it is written.

FIGURE 3. An Example of FAQs for Students

FAQS RESEARCH PAPERS

How do I refer to people I use as research sources, especially those I interview?

Why not just number entries in the Works Cited?

Why is it important to identify the people we quote or reference?

How do I refer to people I use as research sources, especially those I interview?

When referring to research sources, identify them by their claim to expertise and with their full name (first and last names) the first time you refer to them. Simply use the last name after that. For example,

"Thomas Falkner, Professor of Classical Studies at the College of Wooster, believes . . ."

Rather than:

"Dr. Falkner from Wooster believes . . ."

Why not just number entries in the Works Cited?

Some style formats do use numerical ordering for references, but the system we're following uses the alphabet. So the Works Cited doesn't need numbers because it's ordered alphabetically by the last name of the author or reference. This way, citations in the text can be easily found in the list of works cited. For example, if the sentence in the text read, "Thomas Falkner, professor of Classical Studies at the College of Wooster, believes . . ." the citation might be given as follows:

Falkner, Thomas. Personal Interview.
December 22, 2003.

Why is it important to identify the people we quote or reference?

Imagine you read a quote: "Reality TV panders to the basest desires in people—greed and delight in the humiliation of others," says Charles Schulz. You wonder who Charles is. He could be someone knowledgeable or he could be your best friend. But if it reads

- "Reality TV panders to the basest desires in people—greed and delight in the humiliation of others," says Charles Schulz, professor of philosophy at Canandaigua University,
or "Reality TV panders to the basest desires in people—greed and delight in the humiliation of others," says Charles Schulz, a freshman at Canandaigua University,
or "Reality TV panders to the basest desires in people—greed and delight in the humiliation of others," says Charles Schulz, media director of Time/Warner cable,
or "Reality TV panders to the basest desires in people—greed and delight in the humiliation of others," says Charles Schulz, author of *TV Stinks*,
or "Reality TV panders to the basest desires in people—greed and delight in the humiliation of others," says Charles Schulz, chairman of Schulz Real Estate,

then you have a better idea of how much credibility and expertise the person quoted has. Otherwise we're left wondering if it's the Charles Schulz who created *Peanuts*.

of Contents prods the writer to consider the importance of coherence and order in the listing.

Addressing Plagiarism

The writing becomes authentic and the document itself can be judged by the criteria already used to evaluate research papers, except for the notorious thesis statement.

In fact, the FAQs technique can help address the plagiarism issue by making students collaborators with the original research author. Students can be directed to copy into a word-processing file a document, such as a journal article, section from a book, or even a technical encyclopedia, one that they might previously have been tempted to plagiarize simply because it seems to cover everything they want to say

about a topic. For example, Liz found a two-and-a-half-page section about Siberian tigers on a zoo's Web site. She admitted she would have been tempted to import portions of that piece directly into her paper.

Finding the appropriate document requires students to learn traditional library skills, but the students also become coauthors by turning the original document into FAQs. A student would read a paragraph or lengthier section and create a question to use as a heading, copying that heading to the top of the document. The student would then be authorized to manipulate the original a little to make it answer the question, since most articles or passages won't simply fit without a little tinkering. Figure 4 shows an example of FAQs created from a specialized book on psychiatric disorders (limited in this case to comply with copyright restrictions). Students

FIGURE 4. A Source Transformed into a FAQs Page

FAQS ON AUTISM

Is autism a social or a cognitive disorder?

How is autism treated?

Do drugs help autism?

Other than medications, what strategies are used to help autistic children?

Why haven't there been more research studies of autism?

Is autism a social or a cognitive disorder?

Autism has been viewed as a disorder of sensory functioning (stimulus overselectivity), information processing (executive functioning), or innate social dysfunction (theory of mind), but none of these theories alone has the power to fully explain autism.

How is autism treated?

There are three major treatments today:

1. . . . applied behavioral treatment [advocated] by . . . O. Ivar Lovaas;
2. . . . structured teaching treatment, . . . a psychoanalytic, relation-based approach [whose] . . . emphasis is on early identification, parent training, education, social and leisure skills development, and vocational training; and
3. integrated, inclusive education with special education support.

Do drugs help autism?

Medications used in autism appear to have little to offer in improving the social disturbances that are dominant in autism.

Other than medications, what strategies are used to help autistic children?

Four specific non-drug teaching strategies address specific learning problems . . . such as generalization of skills, functional communication, and social skills.

1. teaching "pivotal" behaviors, ones that are applicable across a wide variety of contexts with naturally occurring consequences.
2. building increasingly larger circles of interaction between child and adult, beginning with simple two-way communication that is self-gratifying and works up to increasingly symbolic interactions as the child progresses.
3. . . . teach[ing] students to exchange a picture of an item for the desired object or activity. This system capitalizes on the typically more developed visual skills of persons with autistic spectrum disorders.
4. [using] social stories . . . [that] describe specific social situations along with appropriate social responses.

Why haven't there been more research studies of autism?

Statistical research in exploring possible treatment for autism is difficult because it's unethical to withhold treatment in favor of an alternative intervention and it's difficult to isolate a variable when many different treatments are administered at the same time. Even if a person with autism improves, it's hard to know what caused it.

Source: Siegel, Bryna, Catherine Hayer, and Peter E. Tanguay. "Autistic Disorder." *Treatments of Psychiatric Disorders*. Ed. Glen O. Gabbard et al. 3rd ed. Washington: American Psychiatric, 2001. 126-41.

The FAQs format accomplishes the goals of a traditional research paper assignment but capitalizes on the advantages of computer technology.

might even reorder the sequence of answers to make more sense to a potential reader. The use of brackets and ellipses can be taught to indicate where the original has been changed. The FAQs will have the Table of Contents listing, headings written by the students, and the answers written by the original author of the

research. The source can be cited at the end of the FAQs, using traditional Works Cited formatting.

If students are able to create relevant question headings and a coherent table of contents, then they must have gained some understanding of

the material. The last step would be to ask them to rephrase the answers for a different audience, a student readership that is one grade lower than they are, for example. This will teach paraphrasing in a way that a tenth grader would understand, trying to explain the answers so that a ninth grader would be able to understand. Figure 5 shows a rewritten example of the answer in Figure 4.

Extending the Technique

The FAQs format can be used for differentiated instruction. An instructor who created a tiered assignment by writing three or four alternate tiers or

jigsaws for a targeted assignment (see King-Shaver and Hunter) could distribute the various differentiated assignments using the FAQs technique. Each of the tiered assignments could be designated with bookmarks. The names of the students could then be listed at the top of the document, or in another file if networked, and a hyperlink could be created to connect the student to the section that corresponds to his or her assignment. The students' names could be shuffled so that the order and the grouping are not obviously transparent—stratified highest level first, lowest last, for example.

The FAQs format accomplishes the goals of a traditional research paper assignment but capitalizes on the advantages of computer technology. Students start with their research questions; employ the technology to satisfy their inquiry; collect, synthesize, summarize, and organize the information; and present what they've found to a variety of audiences in a format with which they are familiar from surfing the Internet. In other words, students must learn technological literacy skills, synthesized research skills, organizational writing skills, and real-world applications. I'm guessing the research paper, as we know it and teach it, will soon be a thing of the past, and the FAQs as a new genre of writing may replace "The Research Paper" as the research staple that we teach.

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FIGURE 5. A FAQs Question and Answer Rewritten for a Different (Less Sophisticated) Audience

Is autism a social or a cognitive disorder?

Autism has been viewed as a disorder of sensory functioning (stimulus overselectivity), information processing (executive functioning), or innate social dysfunction (theory of mind), but none of these theories alone has the power to fully explain autism.

Is autism a social behavior or a thinking disorder?

Autism is probably both a social behavior and a thinking disorder, since sometimes it seems to be difficulty with sensory information, including being overstimulated, and sometimes it seems to be difficulty knowing how to behave socially.

James Strickland has enjoyed teaching first-year composition courses for over thirty years. He also enjoys writing professional books with his wife and colleague, Kathleen Strickland, for Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, the latest of which is *Engaged in Learning: Teaching English 6–12* (2002). email: james.strickland@sru.edu.